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Editorial

ARE MIRACLES ESSENTIAL TO RELIGIOUS FAITH?

THE POPULAR CONCEPTION OF A MIRACLE

No one can read current discussions on the subject of miracles without being aware, in the first place, that a very vital religious interest is embodied in the question, and in the second place, that the issue involved in the affirmation or the denial of miracles is seldom clearly apprehended. The current confusion is largely due to the incorporation in our popular definition of miracle of two very different elements, each of which should be considered by itself before entering upon the larger question. The first implicit assumption is that miracles are essential to religious faith. By this it is meant that the belief that God directly exercises his power in the world of nature is indispensable to the vital belief in divine providence. The second element is one which comes from mediaeval scholastic analysis. According to this analysis a miracle is defined as a violation of the laws of nature. Putting the two elements together, we have the popular conception that a miracle is the result of the direct activity of God, which is contrary to the ordinary course of nature.

Now these two elements should not be confused. Suppose a man declares that he does not believe that any event ever occurred contrary to the laws of nature. It is entirely illegitimate to jump to the conclusion that he therefore does not believe that God ever acted directly in the world. He may profoundly believe in the divine activity in the world, while at the same time believing that even in the most extraordinary events God employs laws of nature to bring about the results. On the other hand a man might believe that the

laws of nature are often broken and yet affirm that this is simply because blind chaos is at work. The unfortunate scholastic combination of these two very dissimilar elements is responsible for much misunderstanding and prejudice on the subject. Every attempt to deal with each element on its own merits is a distinct gain.

WERE THE MIRACLES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AIDS TO FAITH

Such an attempt has been made by Professor Frank Hugh Foster in an article on "The New Testament Miracles," published in the July number of the *American Journal of Theology*. He does not confuse the issue by asking whether we can explain these by known laws of nature. He proposes, instead, to ask whether they actually promoted religious faith. He undertakes to investigate the facts so far as they can be ascertained from the gospel records and to ask the question whether, apart from any theory of the evangelists as to the effects of miracles, we have actual evidence that religious faith was promoted by the wonderful deeds of Jesus. The evangelists, it is admitted, declare that after miracles "many believed." The question is whether the actual events which they narrate bear out this theory. If we take all the facts into account, is it true, as is often supposed, that the miracles of Jesus were an essential factor in the awakening and strengthening of religious faith?

Professor Foster's investigation deserves careful study. While he is not entirely free from the temptation to interpret the New Testament so as to support a given thesis, while in his criticism of the resurrection narratives it may be fairly questioned whether he has not overemphasized the first perplexity of the disciples and underestimated the immense importance of their later matured conviction that Jesus was risen, the outcome of his investigation is to show that miracles instead of satisfactorily attesting the truth of Jesus' message and mission, merely whetted the appetite for other physical marvels, so that Jesus, in order to get a hearing for his message, was compelled to refuse requests for "signs." The miracles were actual hindrances to his real work, so that he was obliged to flee from the notoriety caused by them. Even the resurrection had the baneful effect of reinforcing in the minds of the disciples the

false conception of the messianic kingdom, so that Christianity has been weighted with an eschatology which is no essential part of our religion. In the light of these conclusions, Professor Foster declares that the defense of miracles on the ground that they attest the truth of a message is untenable. "We have shown that such attestation was *not a necessity* by showing that it was *not a fact*."

This discussion has clearly challenged the assumption which underlies many defenses of miracles. Miracles, it is affirmed, are indispensable to attest revelation and to awaken faith in that revelation. Therefore miracles must have happened. Clearly this current argument is a *non sequitur*. Suppose a Roman Catholic were to apply it to the alleged miracles in the history of the church. The Protestant would rightly reply that the only way in which to decide whether the reported marvels are facts or not is to apply the canons of historical criticism. Shall we, then, insist upon a critical examination of non-biblical accounts of miracles, and refuse this in the case of biblical miracles? Shall we argue that Catholic "faith" is no basis at all for determining whether to accept miraculous accounts while Protestant "faith" is adequate? Shall we doubt the story about the stigmata of St. Francis because it is supported only by Catholic faith; but decide in favor of the turning of water into wine at Cana because of its utility to Protestant "faith?" To detach this a priori religious assumption from a real investigation into the historicity of reported miracles is a genuine service.

MIRACLE IN SCIENCE AND IN RELIGION

So much may be said for the first element in the discussion. When we come to the second element, namely, the belief that a miracle is a contravention of the laws of nature, it should be recognized that here both religion and science can today come closer together because of a truer conception of what is meant by nature. The old rigid system of "laws" of nature is being broken up by modern science. There are many events which scientists recognize to be inexplicable by any known law. But this inability to furnish a scientific explanation is no reason for denying the existence of an event if it is adequately attested. Thus the old a priori argument against miracles is gone. But, on the other hand, the exceptional

marvel does not necessarily carry with it evidence of divine intervention. Chaos would occasion unexpected and inexplicable events just as really as would divine power. Or (and this is the usual position taken by scientists), there are processes in nature as yet little understood which introduce incalculable elements into our forecasts. These processes are not arbitrary or lawless; we simply do not yet understand them. The universe is growing more marvelous and not less so as science grows. In fact, we are abandoning the artificial mediaeval distinction between the natural and the supernatural because nature itself is full of marvels. It would seem that just as the word "miracle" in the mediaeval theological sense is not to be found in the Bible, so it seems destined to sink out of modern thought; and with it will go those inconsequential *a priori* arguments which are now too current among both dogmatic naturalists and dogmatic supernaturalists. What the religious spirit desires to know is whether any events in this universe sufficiently proclaim the power of God. If this question can be answered in the affirmative, we do not care whether the event be called miracle or nature. Exactly as in certain cases perfectly "natural" events in the Bible are called "signs," so religious faith will judge events purely on the basis of their religious significance and not by asking whether or not they violate the laws of nature.

In short, if anyone feels impelled to enter upon the defense or the denial of miracle he should first make it clear both to himself and to his hearers exactly what he means by miracle. If the emphasis be placed by theologians where the Bible always places it—on the religious significance of an event—and if scientists recognize, as many of them do, that there is abundant room for mystery and marvel in a universe of law, there seems to be no reason why the familiar disputes in which one side is arguing one question and the other side a very different question, should be continued with the unfortunate result of prejudicing theologians against scientists and scientists against theologians. It is for critical science to determine whether an alleged event in the past did or did not occur as reported. It is for religious appreciation to state whether or not an event is a "sign" of divine activity. To attempt to decide a question of historicity by religious faith is as futile as to attempt to ascertain

religious significance by canons of historical criticism. A truer understanding both of the biblical conception of a "sign," and of the modern scientific attitude toward the world, would prevent many unfortunate and un-Christian controversies.

PSYCHOLOGY AND REGENERATION

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENT IN REGENERATION

The familiar testimony of the convert, "Those things which before I loved, now I hate, and those which before I hated, now I love" is constantly regarded as the normal Christian experience. To be sure, every Christian worker knows that the large majority of church members have had no experience which can truthfully be expressed in such language, while the great body of children and young people in the Sunday school cannot possibly give such testimony. And more and more it is coming to be recognized that the sudden transformation of temper and attitude is the exceptional rather than the typical religious experience. Yet the doctrine of regeneration has been formulated upon the basis of the exceptional experience and arbitrarily fitted to the normal and typical. The discussion of the doctrine has been generally on the basis of theology and scripture, but in the July number of the *American Journal of Theology*, Professor George A. Coe considers the question: "What does Modern Psychology permit us to believe in respect to Regeneration?" He makes a rigid distinction between the phases of the doctrine which are matters of theological speculation and the observable facts of consciousness, which are susceptible of psychological investigation. This distinction is fundamental. One may have theories as to the character of God and his relations to men, upon the truth or falsity of which psychology cannot possibly pass; but experiences are states of consciousness and as such are subjects of psychological study. When one claims to have an experience of being in "a state of grace," or of having become regenerate, or an experience of Christ or of the Holy Spirit or of some doctrine, these are psychological processes which can be analyzed and investigated.